

Literature, &c.

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AN INCIDENT

IN THE PENINSULAR WAR.

In the year 18—, a division of French troops occupied the town of Aranda del Duero and its neighborhood. Merino was observing them from his fastnesses in the Sierras of San Lorenzo, San Millan, and Piquera, the latter of which mountain chains rises a little to the north of Aranda. The French general, aware of the vicinity of the Cura, was anxious to surprise him, and if possible to obtain possession of his person; and with this object he had spies out in all directions, to whom he promised great rewards should their information enable him to accomplish the *coup-de-main* he meditated. For some days, however, nothing could be ascertained; and he might almost have doubted that Merino was still in his neighborhood, had not the troops of the latter daily taken prisoners his pickets and patrols, intercepted his despatches, and harassed his outposts. No quarter was given by the Spaniards to the prisoners they took. Mercy was but little the order of the day; nor had the French thought proper to set the example. Merino was especially noted for his vindictive and cruel disposition; and at this moment he was raging like a tigress robbed of her young; for the junta which he had formed for conducting the affairs of the province of Burgos, and drawing the best advantages from its resources, had been surprized by the French, and its members shot. Amongst them were some personal friends; and, on recovering the intelligence, he swore a fearful oath, that for every hair of their heads he would have the blood of a Frenchman.

At length, after one or two fruitless night excursions and ambuscades on the part of the French troops, their General received information from a spy on whom he could depend, that Merino would pass the following night at a village about four leagues from Aranda; and that, having sent the greater part of his forces in another direction, he would have with him only a very small escort. The moment was propitious for the French commander to accomplish his long cherished plan, and he accordingly gave the necessary orders to that effect.

About an hour before nightfall on a Sunday evening, the peasantry of a small village situated at the foot of the Sierra Piquera, were dancing to the music of a couple of guitars on the open *plaza* which is to be found in nearly every Spanish town or village, however small, and which serves on the week-days as a market place—on Sundays and *fêtes* as a ball room. The castanets were rattling, and the dancers throwing themselves into the various graceful attitudes of the bolero, when a sudden stop was put to their amusement the arrival of a small party of horsemen, to the foremost of whom the peasants immediately uncovered, saluting him with the deepest respect.

He was a man of thirty eight or forty years of age, of grave and stern countenance, and of a spare and sinewy frame. His dress was a long frock-coat and waistcoat of rusty black, blue trousers, and a round hat. A pair of black cavalry spurs were screwed to his boot heels, a sabre hung at his side, and a long light carbine, of exquisite workmanship, was strapped to his saddle-bow. His whole appearance was not calculated to attract much attention, which was more likely to be paid to the horse which he bestrode. The animal was from one of the finest studs in Andalusia; the lustrous black of his skin was free from the smallest speck of any other colour; and as he stood pawing the ground, arching his proud neck, and champing his bit, the specks of snow-white foam adhering like stars to his broad chest and flowing mane, he presented a perfect model of equine beauty. A few paces to the rear, another equally fine charger was led, ready saddled and bridled, by an orderly.

The new comer, in whom the reader will probably have already recognized the Cura Merino, enquired for the alcalde of the village; and on the appearance of that functionary, began a conversation with him, which he had not yet terminated when the head of a column of troops appeared. The first that arrived were cavalry, well mounted and equipped—hussars, whose blue pelisses, richly braided with white, well burnished arms and fine horses, would have done no discredit to the more regular French troops which were opposed to them. Each squadron was mounted on horses of an assorted color—one squadron black, one

bay, one grey, and so on. Nearly a thousand horse having passed, the infantry appeared; their plain grey uniforms with red facings, having a cleanly and service-like appearance. On the front of their black leather shakos, were the arms of Burgos, painted in white, and surrounded by the words 'Regimiento de Arlanza,' a name taken from a small river which runs a little to the south of the above named city. Four battalions marched through the *plaza*, and the rear was brought up by another squadron of hussars. The whole of the troops, on leaving the village, followed a lane turning to the left, which after a march of about half a league, led to an open heath of small extent, bounded on the north by the mountains, on the west by a thick pine wood, and on the south by some pasture lands, in one corner of which had been erected an extensive *corral* or stable for cattle and sheep; a sort of shed constructed of wood, and with a large doorway or opening at one end. Here the cavalry who first arrived, put up their horses, while the infantry, and about three hundred hussars, who formed the rear guard of the column, disposed themselves for a bivouac. A better spot could hardly have been selected. To the south of the pasture, and in the direction of Aranda del Duero, was a small rising ground, the slopes of which were covered with lofty trees. Under the shelter of these the infantry established themselves; the cavalry picketed their horses in the flat; wood was collected, and fires lighted in perfect security—the uneven and mountainous nature of the country precluding the possibility of their being seen by the French. Every thing was done with the greatest order and regularity. The horses in the *corral* were allowed to be unsaddled; but the squadron which was to bivouac merely unbridled, in order to be sooner ready in case of a surprise. When the horses had had their corn and the men had refreshed themselves, the latter lay down in as good order as if they were expecting to be immediately roused and called into action; the infantry by companies in the rear of their piled arms; the cavalry in front of their horses, which were picketed in line. The fires that had been lighted were allowed to die away; and the noisy hum of more than 4000 men was replaced by the greatest silence, only interrupted now and then by the rattling collar-chain of some restless horse, or the challenge of the sentries when a straggler approached their posts.

About two hours after dark, Merino, attended by an aide-de-camp, and by an orderly leading his spare horse, rode round the bivouac, visited the guards that had been mounted, gave some short orders for precaution to his second in command; and at length having completed his inspection, left the ground occupied by his troops, without perhaps, a single man being able to say which direction he had taken. Still accompanied by his aide-de-camp and orderly, he struck into a mountain defile, and pursued his way in silence for more than a quarter of an hour. During this time he followed a road so full of turnings and windings, that it would have been nearly impossible for any one who was previously unacquainted with it, to have retraced his steps even in the day-time. Having arrived at what he considered a fitting spot, he turned to his orderly—'Tu aqui, (stop here,) he said, 'and in two hours be ready.' The soldier, accustomed to Merino's habits, dismounted, and occupied himself in unsaddling and feeding his own horse and the one which he led. Meantime, the Cura pursued his way, now by the side of precipices, and over smooth rocks and stones, on which it appeared every moment that the horses feet must slip from under them; now through deep ravines, overhung by old stunted oak trees, whose branches bowed down by heavy masses of deep green ivy, by mistletoe, and other parasite plants, formed a compact arch, and shut out the smallest glimmering of light from those who passed beneath their shade. At some distance from his orderly, the cautious priest left his aide de camp in nearly as unceremonious a manner as he had done the soldier, and proceeded along to a spot of smooth turf, sheltered by trees and shrubs surrounded by steep rocks, and accessible by one narrow and difficult path, more fitting for the feet of goats than of horses or men. He unsaddled his charger, and after carefully covering him with a blanket, fastened on his nose bag, containing an ample food of corn. He then took from his valise a small iron pot a fragment of bread and some chocolate. He collected a few sticks, and lit a fire, and fetching some water from a neighbouring rivulet, procured himself in a very few minutes, a cup of chocolate.

Having eaten his frugal supper, he took a large draft of cold water, and stretching himself under a tree was in an instant asleep.

In somewhat less than two hours, the indefatigable Merino was again in the saddle, and on his road back to the bivouac of his troops; calling on his way for his aid de camp and orderly. It was past midnight, and the sky which the sun set left clear and starry, was now over-spread with clouds, which rendered the darkness complete, especially in the neighbourhood of the mountains. The Cura, however, seemed nowise embarrassed by this circumstance; but guided his horse through the most intricate and difficult paths with as much facility as if he had been in broad daylight on a good road. Having arrived at the bivouac and satisfied of its well-being, and of the alertness of the sentries, he turned his horse's head south; and soon finding himself on some tolerably open country, he struck into a canter, which shortly bro't him to the vicinity of the *Camine Real*, or highway from Burgos to Madrid, on which Aranda del Duero is situated. Here he halted, and dismounting, listened attentively: but for some minutes no sound broke the stillness of the night. He had laid his hand on his horse's mane to remount, when the regular monotonous noise produced by the march of a regular body of troops became audible. The Cura sprung into the saddle, and with his two companions retired behind a broken hedge which bordered part of the road. The noise increased, and shortly appeared, coming from the direction of Aranda, a score of cavaliers, whose small black shapskas and long lances, denoted them to be Poles of the French Imperial Guard. These were followed, at a short interval, by nearly two hundred more, and by a battalion of infantry also Poles; of which nation there were a vast number serving with the French armies in Spain. 'What are these?' exclaimed Merino, as soon as the first horsemen came in sight; and when their near approach enabled him to distinguish the character of the troops, his voice trembled with savage exultation as he turned to his aid de camp with these words—'They are French!' He allowed the whole column to pass him, carefully noting their numbers and then setting spurs to his horse, galloped off to the *corral*.

The high-road, which the French troops were following in a northerly direction, passed on the eastern side of the village in which we introduced Merino to the reader, and whence the country lane or cross-road by which the Spaniards arrived at their bivouac ground, led westward. The lane debouched on the sort of heath or waste before mentioned, at the further extremity of which was a pine wood; whilst the *corral* and fields in which the Cura's band had stationed itself, were more to the south. It will be understood by this description of the ground, that Merino in a few minutes' canter across the country reached his troops; while it would take the French nearly an hour to arrive at the same point by the more circuitous route they were following. Before they had entered the village, the Cura had returned to the *corral*, and called to a person in the garb of a countryman, who was lying wrapped in a woolen rug at the entrance of the building, 'Julian!'—'Senor!' answered the peasant, and sprung to his feet. Merino whispered a few words in his ear, and the man immediately started off at full speed.

When the French arrived at the village in which they expected to find Merino, their first care was to place sentries round the houses, which were but few in number, and a general search then ensued for the important prisoner whom they expected to make. Meanwhile the alcalde, and some other of the inhabitants, were brought before the commanding-officer of the expedition; but to all his questions as to when they had last seen Merino, and where he was to be found, they replied in a manner but little calculated to assist the search. They declared themselves entirely unacquainted with the Cura's places of resort, and that for months he had not been in their neighborhood. To promises and offers of reward they opposed protestations of ignorance; and to menaces and blows a dogged silence. The French colonel, who had fully expected to catch Merino in bed in the village, and to carry him off in triumph to Aranda, found himself perplexed, and turned to consult with some of his officers who stood near. Around them were grouped soldiers bearing torches, by the flickering light of which was dimly distinguished the dark line of cavalry drawn up in the *plaza*; while in the midst of a party of infantry stood the alcalde and four other peasants,

holding their large-brimmed felt hats in their hands, their slouching attitudes, bare necks, and sunburnt countenances, contrasting strangely with the military stiffness, pale faces, and fierce mustaches of their guards.

'Shoot these men,' said the commanding officer, addressing himself to one of his subalterns. In a few seconds their hands were bound, and the firing party drawn up. But it was not the intention of the French officer to execute his threat—he merely wished to frighten the prisoners into greater communicativeness. It may be doubted how far he would have succeeded; but a young peasant, who had remained unobserved behind the soldiers, stepped forward. 'May it please your Excellency,' he said in Spanish, 'to cause these men to be unbound, and I will be your guide to the Cura Merino. I know the farm house in which he was to pass the night, and by the road I can show you, an hour will be sufficient to arrive there.'

'What are you, and why did you not speak before?' asked the colonel.

'If I did not speak sooner,' was the reply, 'it was that I had no wish to have a knife or a bayonet in my body, or half a dozen bullets in my head, the reward which I shall inevitably receive from some of the Cura's followers, if they learn that I have betrayed their General. When I found, however, that you seriously intended to shoot my father because he would not tell you what he did not know, I resolved to risk my own life to save his.'

The man designated by the peasant as his father, stared at the speaker, and seemed about to reply; but on an almost imperceptible sign made to him by the young man, he remained silent. This *manège* did not escape the quick eye of the French chief.

'Hark ye, my man,' he said, 'your tongue runs almost too glibly, and your volubility is nearly as suspicious as the reserve of yonder churl with whom I observed you telegraphing. I shall, however, release these men, because I can find them again should I want them. For yourself, these are my conditions; fifty ounces of gold in your pocket the moment I have that lurking fox, Merino, in my power; one ounce of lead in your skull if you deceive or lead me astray.'

'I accept the terms, Colonel,' boldly replied the person addressed; but it is time you were stirring, for the fighting-priest is no leech, and we might find the nest warm but the bird flown.'

The troops were immediately put in motion, the guide being provided with a horse, and placed between the colonel and another officer. Having passed through the lane, a compact column was formed, which moved across the heath at a quick steady pace in the direction of the pine wood. The French commander renewed from time to time, his promises of rewards, and threats of a speedy death, according as the one or the other might be merited by his guide; who contented himself with replying, that he was under no apprehension, and that his *Excoelencia* would be satisfied with the result of his expedition. The night was so dark, that not an object could be discerned further off than fifteen or twenty paces. The head of the column had arrived at about the distance from the first pine-trees, when a strong voice challenged in French—'Who goes there?'—'France,' answered the Colonel, laying his hand on one of his holster pistols. 'Fire!' commanded the same voice as before. The wood was illuminated by the simultaneous flash of five hundred muskets, the echoes of the reports running round the mountains, and at length dying away in the distance. The two front ranks of the French infantry fell almost to a man. At the same instant the right flank was charged by a squadron of cavalry, and the whole column thrown into inextricable confusion. A torch, which had been kept concealed by the Spaniards, was produced, and a hundred others lighted at it. By their glare might be seen the whole of Merino's forces quietly hemming in the devoted little band, which, already broken by the volley and the subsequent charge of the hussars, was in no state to contend with the far superior forces brought against it. Those who attempted to resist, and amongst them was the Colonel, who had been wounded but not killed, by the first discharge, were instantly despatched. The remainder, nearly seven hundred men, surrendered themselves prisoners; and their arms, and the horses of the cavalry, having been taken from them, they were marched down to the *corral*, into which they were driven pell-mell, like a flock of sheep into the slaughter house, and the entrance of the building was, by Merino's order, immediately blocked up with bushes, branches, and trunks of trees which